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FOLKLORE AND OBSCENITY: DEFINITIONS AND PROBLEMS

FOR THE SAKE of brevity, let me pretend that it is agreed that folklore is traditional cultural lore; that it is transmitted traditionally rather than by official sources; that it consists of ideas which find various forms of expression: in sounds, or actions, or objects.¹ For purposes of this discussion, I limit myself to folklore as verbal expression only, and as something potentially collectible and publishable. For various and detailed definitions of folklore, I refer you to the ones in Funk and Wagnalls *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*,² which prove how widely responsible scholars can differ on a proper definition. Nevertheless, within the variety, a much simplified working definition such as the one I have given can be tolerated.

In defining the obscene I cannot count so positively on everyone's tacit acceptance. As Henry Miller wrote, "To discuss the nature and meaning of obscenity is almost as difficult as to talk about God."³ Here, as with folklore, even a dictionary provides no arbitrary definition; it does, however, make a good starting point, as a record of usage. According to the Oxford Dictionary (properly speaking, *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*) the word "obscene" is of doubtful etymology, but has a root meaning of "ill-omened" or "inauspicious." This meaning is given as one definition of the word, but is now considered a Latinism, and obsolete. The first meaning listed for obscene is "offensive to the senses or to taste or refinement: disgusting, filthy, foul, abominable, loathsome." As an example of this usage, which is considered archaic, I select a citation from 1725 to Pope's translation of the *Odyssey* (xx. 263): "In rags obscene decreed to roam." It seems to me that this meaning of obscene is still very much alive when people speak of "a dirty song" or a "dirty story," and when they refer to bowdlerizing a text as "cleaning it up."

The *NED*'s second definition of obscene is the one more commonly used in our society: "offensive to modesty or decency: expressing or suggesting unchaste or lustful ideas; impure, indecent, lewd." The difficulty here lies in defining what is unchaste, impure, or lewd. Since experts have tried and failed to agree on a more precise definition of obscene for our time,⁴ for working purposes I shall simply use the two I have cited, with the recognition that definitions of obscenity have varied from generation to generation.

Allen Walker Read remarks, "What is innocuous in one period may become indecent in the next in a manner quite unpredictable."⁵ And vice versa. Today's advertising of "falsies," uplift brassieres, perfumes, and so forth may strike us as indelicate or in poor taste, but rarely, I think, as obscene. We find it difficult to conceive of a period when the word "leg" was considered unmentionable and pantallettes were used to conceal those "obscene" supports for a piano which we would unblushingly call piano legs. But back in 1882 John Ashton, an intelligent Victorian, in the introduction to his popular edition of a collection of eighteenth-century chapbooks, wrote:

The Jest-books, pure and simple, are, from their extremely coarse witticisms, utterly incapable of being reproduced for general reading nowadays, and the whole of them are more or less highly spiced. . . . In reading these books we must not, however, look upon them from our present point of view. Whether men or women are better now than they used to be, is a moot point, but things used to be spoken of openly which are now never whispered, and no harm was done, nor offence taken; so . . . many of the *bonnes histoires* are extremely laughable, though to our own thinking equally indelicate.⁶

Our society today, although more liberal than the Victorian one, still declares that certain words about the excretory functions and their products, and many aspects of sex, are largely taboo in polite conversation or in print. We accept, of course, many more "indecentcies" in conversation than we do in print.

The Victorian taboo on certain words has lingered most in rural areas that were until recently quite isolated. Vance Randolph and Allan M. Trout have reported that in some sections of the Ozarks and the Kentucky mountains, quite recently, the word "bull" was never used in conversation between the sexes. MacEdward Leach says that even today in Labrador a woman will warn someone of the dangerous "big animal" in a pasture instead of saying "bull."

What makes something offensive to modesty or decency? It would seem that each society decides for itself, the majority opinion constituting a mandate. Certain so-called primitive societies accept mention or discussion of any aspect of sex very calmly, but consider any mention of excretion obscene. Other groups regard other subjects as obscene. Waterman reminds us that a reference to mixed eating in a Trobriand folktale must be regarded as an obscenity because of that society's taboos.⁷

Furthermore, within each culture, there is constant change in what is considered obscene, and these changes occur at varying rates of speed, at various levels of society. Michael Frayn, in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* for 10 November 1960, amusingly predicts the next shift in the English-speaking world. Since, he says, "sex . . . the last stronghold of taboo in our society . . . is beginning to give way . . . and people may insist on keeping one area permanently shrouded . . . , the new taboo subject will be something analogous to sexual relationships—an experience which will be fairly universal, involving a skilled technique which gives pleasure if properly understood but leads to disaster if misapplied." He suggests that motoring would fit these requirements and projects into the future the logical consequences: the legal prosecution for books that describe racing in detail, the motion picture code stipulation that "a motorist may be shown holding the steering wheel of his car, but no more"—on into the verbal, psychological, and social consequences of the new taboo.

Of course, what the individual in any society considers obscene is determined not only by his conditioning in his social group, but by his private taboos or inhibitions. Before this mixed audience I can unblushingly refer to a bull rather than a he-cow, but I would refrain from using certain other four-letter words, not so much because it might shock you as because it would shock *me*. As a folklorist, I have been willing to *print* "obscene" words which informants have used, but after the unfortunate reaction to one article I published, which jeopardized my job in a southern college, I am not sure I would ever again try to print such material in a semipopular journal. One can only envy the freedom accorded today to novelists in the matter of forbidden words.

An historical citation from the *NED*, from the *Athanaeum* in 1899, reads, "Our

later writers are saucy rather than obscene." This implies that it is possible to flirt with a "forbidden" topic if one is witty enough, and yet escape from being regarded as obscene. Today, as at the turn of the century, creative or professional writers can do just this. So can oral storytellers. A phrase that is not uncommon in our sophisticated urban society is, "I don't mind a dirty story as long as it's clever."

For folklorists this attitude is no help, since they are committed to fidelity to the spoken word as recorded, and the words or references that make a story "dirty" are often not acceptable in print. Furthermore, to a folkloist, either pulling out the offensive words or euphemizing them is unscientific and unjustified, besides being ruinous to the effect of a story!

I suggest that for a folklorist, the basic problem is not the theoretical one of attempting to define obscenity, but rather the practical one of deciding whether or not he is to publish materials which would be regarded as obscene by any considerable section of the reading population. And if he does publish such materials, in what form, and with what cautions?

Let us recognize clearly that a double standard exists, perhaps will always exist, in publishing. One set of rules applies when a book is aimed at a popular audience, and another if it is a serious study meant for a limited professional audience. When an anthropologist or psychologist publishes a serious study for a professional audience, he does not have to pull his punches. If he is publishing a book aimed at a popular market, his publisher will decide how far he thinks the book can go in giving frank details or language. I suspect, by the way, that publishers would often include much more "obscene" material than collectors are willing to submit in their manuscripts.

Earlier in this century when anthropologists were busy collecting American Indian myths and tales in text, they usually published them in a museum or university anthropological series, with English translations. Invariably, when you get to the lustful doings of Coyote or some other trickster figure, or to versions of the toothed-vagina motif, the English translation suddenly lapses into Latin.

It is one of the minor claims to fame of the American Folklore Society that in its publications it only rarely fell to that snobbish (though practical) escape which put a premium on a knowledge of Latin. Sometimes the contributors deleted or euphemized expressions, but so far as I know, the editors did not. Some readers might have been shocked, and perhaps some even resigned in protest; but the editors have calmly continued to regard the *JOURNAL* and the *MEMOIRS* as serious scientific publications, interested in recording all aspects of folklore as a contribution to scientific knowledge. Even today you can buy from the Secretary of the American Folklore Society copies of Memoir 38, *Japanese Peasant Songs*, by John F. Embree, which contains, among other things, a magnificent song in praise of the penis.

While the amount of obscene material in a folklore publication is thus determined largely by the publisher and/or editor, the collector himself has certain responsibilities to his informants and colleagues which should guide him in his handling of obscene material, in collecting as well as in publishing it.

Frequently what seems like censorship on the part of a collector may be simply the restrictions of circumstance or a matter of understandable caution. For instance, the absence of certain kinds of obscenity in a woman collector's material has sometimes been taken as a case of conscious suppression, though it is not always so. Most women collectors would not be told certain kinds of male obscenities voluntarily, and ill-con-

sidered attempts to get such taboo material might ruin their rapport with informants. In such a case the collector should, however, state that she was not told, and did not solicit, such material, and give whatever evidence she may have that it exists.

Collectors of children's lore have a special problem in the handling of obscenity, and so far have not coped with it satisfactorily. Because the major books in this field, in English, have been edited for a general audience, there is still no complete treatment of children's lore in England or the United States. Newell and Bolton apparently edited out indelicacies either because they thought them ephemeral or for reasons of personal distaste. More recently the Opies' book, *The Lore and Language of School-children* (Oxford, 1959), appeared equally without a proper representation of obscene material, though they do mention that unfortunately the specimens best suited for tracing oral transmission are of a "scurrilous or indelicate" nature. An English reviewer felt that the Opies rather drew away from this kind of material themselves, and wrote: "The aura of gentility has hung over English folklorists too long and is certainly lifting now; but traces of it still linger. I do not think 'dirty' songs and stories are the most important part of children's folklore, but they are a permanent and revealing part of the fabric, and to play them down . . . slightly falsifies the texture."⁸

In the Opies' defense, a study such as theirs, done largely through the schools, would hardly have had an honest representation of obscene materials. Children know very well what things are regarded as obscene by their elders, and usually do not say such things in their presence, knowing they will meet with disapproval. Nor can most collectors afford to ask children for such materials in a school situation, since if the request comes to the attention of certain parents it may wreck the collecting project in that community.

Again, what seems to be required, if the exigencies of popular publication prevented their using such obscene material as they did get, is a clear statement of the existence and supposed extent of such material, and an attempt to publish it in some form which would reach only a professional audience. In this way students of the function of folklore might have available the full evidence on the children's repertory.

We have been speaking primarily of a collector's responsibility to his colleagues in the handling of obscene material. There is also a major caution to be observed for the sake of his informants. In dealing with obscenity, as with any other lore regarded as sacred or secret, the collector has an obligation not to publish anything that would jeopardize the reputation or standing of an informant with his own people. Here again, the collector must have in mind his responsibility to his colleagues in folklore, since tactless publication, like tactless behavior in the field, may make it impossible for another folklorist ever to collect in that area.

In essence, I think that a folklorist should never refuse to collect, and should never suppress, obscene materials simply because they are considered obscene. He may be justified, however, in withholding certain items from general publication for the reasons given above. This may mean that some items will have to be relegated to the relative obscurity and safety of microcards or other microprint.

In a popular or general publication, what the public considers obscene may have to be omitted, but the omitted material should be made available to students in some other way, perhaps in articles in professional journals. I object to bowdlerizing texts in order to publish them, in either a scholarly or a popular book. If an informant himself has done the editing, on his own initiative, that is a different matter; but the nature of the censorship should be made quite clear.

In scholarly journals and memoirs one should expect to be allowed to publish the complete evidence of one's collecting, subject only to the responsibilities discussed above. In any supposedly representative published collection, regardless of the audience, the kinds of materials that have been omitted, for any reason and whether obscene or not, should be clearly stated.

NOTES

1. This is a revised form of my paper for the panel on Folk Literature and the Obscene at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society in Philadelphia, 28 December 1960. The paper was prepared during my term as Visiting Professor of Folklore in the English Department of the University of Arkansas. I wish here to express my thanks both to the department, for various courtesies, and to the university for paying my fare to the meetings.

2. Maria Leach, ed. (New York, 1949), I, 398-403.

3. Henry Miller, "Obscenity and the Law of Reflection," *The Intimate Henry Miller* (Signet Book Dr653, New York, 1959), p. 140.

4. See Miller, pp. 140 ff.

5. Allen Walker Read, "Noah Webster as a Euphemist," *Dialect Notes*, VI, Part 8 (July 1934), 385.

6. John Ashton, *Chap-Books of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1882), p. xi.

7. Richard A. Waterman, "The Role of Obscenity in the Folk Tales of the 'Intellectual' Stratum of Our Society," *Journal of American Folklore*, LXII (1949), 162.

8. Richard Hoggart, "The Child's Own Language," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, LXXXI, No. 20, 12 November 1959, 12.

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